

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 66: Online Storage Space ***

This issue, we'll take a look at services that allow you to store files online. Are these online storage spaces useful? Or safe?

Storage space services are the online equivalent of those self-storage locker businesses. With both, you get a certain amount of space in which you can store your stuff. Once you have a key (for the online version, a password) you can store items and take them out again as needed. You can make files private (so only you can access them), semi-private (so only people to whom you've given a password can access your files), or open to the public, accessible to anyone.

A Web browser is all it takes to upload and download files -- these services usually provide slick interfaces for navigating your online directories, transferring, and deleting files. Some of these sites require Java, JavaScript, or cookies, so you may need to have those functions enabled in your browser.

Why would you want to store files online? Here are a few ways it could prove useful:

- * Off-site backups. Making backups onto tape, floppy, or CD-ROM is important, but what if those backups are lost in the same robbery, flood, or fire that claims your computer? If you store your most important files on the Internet, they'll be safe even if your computer isn't.

- * Sharing files. Several online storage sites allow you to share files with others, either by making them available to the public or by giving passwords to colleagues whom you want to access the files. This can be a good way to distribute files -- pictures from a party or MP3 song files -- without messing with e-mail file attachments.

- * Load up your iMac. Moving files from an old computer to a new iMac, which lacks a floppy drive, can be tricky. A solution is to upload files from the older computer to an online file storage space, then download them again to the iMac.

- * PDA assistance. If you use a personal digital assistant -- which typically lack floppy and hard drives -- online storage spaces can be a convenient way to move files to your home PC or share them with colleagues.

- * A central place to store files you need often. If you need to access certain files from multiple Internet-connected computers, it can make sense to store them on the Net. That way you can fetch them no matter where you happen to be. This could be a big advantage for business travelers.

A plain old Web site might be a better option for some of these tasks, such as making files available to the public. A storage space can be the better answer for sharing private files, making backups, or when you simply need more space than free Web servers offer.

-.-.- What About Speed and Security? -.-.-

There are several uses for online storage, but don't throw away your floppy drive yet. Storing files online also has drawbacks. Most notably, storing and retrieving files is only as fast as your Internet connection. If you have a 56 KBPS or slower modem, you already know how long it can take to transfer 2 or 3 megs of data -- imagine the time you could spend filling 25 megs. If you've got a lightning-fast cable modem, it is less of an issue, but still, saving files to the Net is much

slower than putting them on a floppy disk.

Security is another important issue. If you're using the Internet to store private backups of your personal diary or tax records, you definitely wouldn't want strangers to get access. Read the Web site's policy on the security of the data that you store there. Make sure you store private information in a directory that isn't accessible to others. For keeping private info private, your best option is to use encryption software to encode your data before you upload it. (If you need to download the backup later, you'll simply need to know your code to decrypt it again.)

Of course, if you're using the storage space to distribute MP3s of your garage band's tunes, you would want others to be able to easily find and download your files. In this case, security isn't an issue.

What about cost? Many storage space sites are free. As usual, you'll see banner ads on their sites and may have to put up with the occasional commercial e-mail from these companies. Some of the sites offer extended services for a fee, such as extra storage space and tighter security.

-.-.- Service Roundup -.-.-

With so many file storage sites to choose from, which one should you use? Compare the features of the sites for yourself -- security of files and amount of storage space should be top considerations. One storage site that I checked out was offering a less-than-generous three megabytes of space -- a trifle. Many more offer about 20 megabytes, while the most generous offer 25 MB.

Ready to give online file storage a try? Here is a roundup of some of the services that are available:

idrive (www.idrive.com) offers 25 megabytes of free, secure online disk space, accessible from any Web browser. It provides private and shared file areas, as well as a public space you can use as a Web site. (If you don't need to store files, but do need a huge Web site, this can be the way to go.) The "sync" feature allows users to upload an entire directory with one click.

Free Disk Space (www.freediskspace.com) also offers 25 MB of free storage. The amount of storage space is upgradable in 5 MB chunks, up to 50 MB, for each friend you refer. This service has several splinter sites: FreeMacSpace, FreePCSpace, FreePDASpace, FreeLinuxSpace, and FreeMP3Space -- these are all the same animal, each wrapped up to please different kinds of users. (For instance, the FreeLinuxSpace site touts sharing of open source software, while the FreeMacSpace arm explains how it can assist users with floppy-less Macs.) But it's all one service -- if you choose to share files, you can share them with anyone, no matter what computer platform they use.

FreeDrive (www.freedrive.com) offers 20 MB of free storage, and emphasis sharing files with colleagues. When signing up, it asks for more personal information than the other services (such as your occupation and interests,) so that they can send users a weekly commercial e-mail message. This isn't my favorite thing, but at least they are honest about it.

Yet another option is X:drive (www.xdrive.com), which offers 25 MB of space. As with the other services, you can access your X:drive files via a Web browser on any computer. A unique feature of X:drive is the ability to access the online storage space from within the Windows 95/98 file manager, just like a floppy or hard drive. It basically makes your online storage space a network drive. For this feature, you need Windows and special software. When your X:drive starts filling up, you have the option to purchase additional space.

Filehome (www.filehome.com) isn't a free service, but offers power functions intended for business users who need to share files. You can buy from 25 to 100 megabytes of space, with single-user access or allowing multiple people to access the files. Other features include e-mail notification when one of your colleagues modifies the files in a shared storage space.

Carefully read the information provided about a service before you sign up -- some that I checked out (and haven't listed here) didn't seem to stack up, offering a pittance of storage space, or no mention of the amount of space until after you signed up. One site said "We are not a backup service and reserve the right to delete your files if you don't log in for a month." With so many online storage sites to choose from, there's no need to mess with any less-than-personable services.

==*== RELEVANT WEB SITES ==*==

idrive: <http://www.idrive.com>
Free Disk Space: <http://www.freediskspace.com>
FreeDrive: <http://www.freedrive.com>
Filehome: <http://www.filehome.com>
X:Drive: <http://www.xdrive.com>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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